DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 355 609 CS 508 143

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TITLE	The Evolution of Rhetorical Criticism.
PUB DATE	24 Sep 89
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Eastern Communication Association Conference on Rhetoric and Public Address (September 24, 1989).
PUB TYPE	Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational History; Higher Education; Public Speaking; Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Criticism; Speech Curriculum; Teaching Methods; Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	*Academic Discourse Communities; Historical Background; *Speech Communication Education

ABSTRACT

Rhetorical criticism and the way it is taught has evolved considerably over the past 30 years. In the 1950s, virtually all instructors used the same textbook and the "effect" model of teaching was used universally. White males were virtually the only speakers studied, and the classical tradition held complete dominion. A historical perspective was deemed necessary for the sake of objectivity and background materials. In the 1960s the restrictive, classical effect model of criticism began to break down. Various publications of the period illustrate the shifting perspectives. By the early 1970s there was general agreement that there were many ways to practice criticism. Over these years, expanded methods and the possible forms of discourse flourished. A Western States Communication Association seminar in 1989 examined these issues at length. In broad terms, the task of the teacher of rhetorical criticism is to help students think critically and analytically about discourse, to ask what is going on in communication and how it is taking place. In short, the emerging field emphasizes a need to produce in students a familiarity with a broad range of methods of criticism and non-oratorical forms of discourse. (Thirty-three footnotes are included.) (HB)

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The Evolution of Rhetorical Criticism

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As I reflected on the Communication Education symposium on criticism[1] that is the topic for this panel, I realized that I taught my first undergraduate criticism course in the Spring semester of the 1957-1958 academic year. With that I recognized that my intended role on this panel was that of the certified old-timer (some would say certifiable). I intend to play the part by looking at the Communication Education symposium within the context of the evolution in rhetorical criticism over the last thirty years.

I

In the 1950s the text on criticism was Thonssen and Baird's Speech Criticism.[2] In large part the focus of this work was a review of the history of rhetorical theory, and criticism was clearly a by-product of that theory. That historical review ended with Richard Whately and a one paragraph notice of James Winans' Public Speaking which had been published in 1915.[3] By and large Thonssen and Baird covered the same ground as Golden, Berquist, and Coleman's The Rhetoric of Western Thought[4] although it only discussed theorists and did not contain excerpts. Collected excerpts appeared in Thonssen's Selected Readings in Rhetoric and Public Speaking.[5]

The then contemporary essays in criticism that Thonssen and Baird point to as exemplars were those in A History and Criticism of American Public Address. This two volume work edited by William Norwood Brigance was

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sponsored by the Speech Association of America (now the Speech Communication Association) and published in 1943.[6] This collection offers an excellent illustration of the actual nature of the enterprise of rhetorical criticism up until the mid-1960s. The first five chapters dealing with public address history are followed by 29 critical studies, each one of which uses a man's name as the title. Only one of these speaker studies deals with someone who is not white, and the most contemporary deal with speakers who died in 1925.[7] Several of the speakers studied would most charitably be referred to as "obscure" today.

The first two critical essays illustrate well the content of criticism in this period. The study of Jonathan Edwards deals with the topics of the speaker, the speeches, and the occasion.[8] The topics for the study of Theodore Parker are invention, arrangement, style, and presentation.[9] There is virtually no deviation from one of these two patterns in any of the other 27 studies. In one way or another every study deals with the effectiveness of the speaker. Perhaps the most imaginative of these is the essay on Stephen A. Douglas by Forest Whan, who presents an extensive analysis of extrinsic evidence to prove effect.[10] The message that the reader draws from these 29 "models" of rhetorical criticism is clear: The only correct method of criticism springs from the classical tradition of audience-occasion-speaker--speech or invention-arrangement-style-memory-delivery and is concerned about effect.

As the 29 speaker studies suggest, the nature of the object for criticism was also restricted. This restriction can be seen in the fact that the virtually universal title for academic departments at the time was Speech Department. Two personal experiences illustrate the prevailing restricted

view of the appropriate critical object. At U.C.L.A. in 1958 the department's leading critic/scholar advised me in all seriousness that it would be inappropriate to study any speaker more recent than Woodrow Wilson on that grounds that 1) it would be impossible to be "objective" about a more current orator and 2) full information or data would not be available. An historical perspective was needed to do proper criticism. I have addressed the validity of this argument elsewhere and will not do so here.[11] The second experience was at Purdue in 1961 where I was advised that we were in the business of studying speech--oratory--and thus it would be inappropriate to use opinions of the Supreme Court of the United States as objects for critical analysis.

In the 1960s the restrictive, classical effect model of criticism begins to break down. Two books contributed substantially to this process. The first was Rhetoric and Criticism by Marie Hochmuth Nichols published by L.S.U. Press in 1963.[12] In this series of lectures Nichols outlined the possibilities of a variety of approaches to criticism. Two of the lectures were restatements of her essays on Kenneth Burke and I.A. Richards that had appeared in The Quarterly Journal of Speech in the 1950s where they had had amazingly little impact on the thinking of graduate school teachers of criticism.[13] But now people were beginning to pay attention.

The second important study was Edwin Black's Rhetorical Criticism published two years later.[14] Black's critical examination of the assumptions of classical methods of criticism and his conclusion that effect studies are not necessarily the perfect model provoked controversy and an active debate on the nature of criticism within the discipline. The resistance to change can be seen in Anthony Hillbruner's Critical Dimensions published in 1966[15] and Rhetorical Criticism Methods and Models edited by J. A. Hendrix

and Jerome Polisky in 1968.[16] Both are reassertions of the traditional, classical effect model of criticism. However, 1968 also saw the publication of Essays on Rhetorical Criticism edited by Thomas R. Nilsen.[17] This volume republished a symposium on rhetorical criticism that had originally appeared in the Spring 1957 issue of Western Speech where it had largely been ignored.[18] Five essays were added including two that directly addressed the idea of pluralism and variety in critical methods.[19]

By the early 1970s there was general agreement that there was more than one way to do criticism, and that agreement received formal recognition in Scott and Brock's Methods of Rhetorical Criticism.[20] This collection of essays on critical theory with accompanying examples of the theory in practice explained and illustrated the traditional, speaker centered method and went on to present a half-dozen other approaches to the enterprise of rhetorical criticism. By reprinting Leland Griffin's work on movements[21] Scott and Brock explicitly recognized that criticism might deal with something other than a single, discrete, oratorical, rhetorical event.

Further recognition of the expanding possibilities of discourse that might be appropriate subjects for rhetorical analysis was seen in the publication of the product of an SCA Research Board conference on rhetorical criticism held at the University of Kansas in 1976.[22] Conference participants considered both non-oratorical forms of discourse and the possibilities of grouping similar kinds of discourse for analysis. By now critical studies published in the journals were dealing with a variety of critical objects. The Speech Department label began to give way to Speech Communication or even Communication---labels that more correctly reflected the critical interests of the faculties housed in these departments. Finally, Medhurst

and Benson's Rhetorical Dimensions in Media dealt exclusively with rhetorical criticism in non-oratorical forms of discourse.[23]

In sum, this brief history of the development of thinking about rhetorical criticism over the last thirty years demonstrates that until some time in the late 1960s there was general agreement in the discipline that there was one way to do criticism--the classical method-and one appropriate critical object--the single oratorical event or perhaps the oratorical output of a single speaker. The evolution in criticism that has taken place has expanded both our methods of criticism and the possible forms of discourse that are appropriate objects of criticism.

II

Given the evolution of thinking about rhetorical criticism, the Communication Education symposium on teaching criticism in particularly disappointing. The essays that appear do not reflect the diversity of critical methods and objects that one would expect today. The common pattern is that criticism is the study of effect.

Since the Communication Education symposium was the product of a seminar on teaching rhetorical criticism to undergraduates that took place at the Western Speech Communication Association meeting in Spokane, Washington on February 18, 1989, I turned to the original documents of that seminar that have been compiled by Harrry Sharp.[24] This collection contains 13 position papers and 13 syllabi from various of seminar participants. Seven sample student papers are also included. Review of these materials presents and mixed picture but certainly more diversity than the Communication Education

symposium suggests. A small sample will adequately illustrate this point.

James Andrews offers an outline of his Indiana University course entitled "Speech Criticism."[25] The course uses his criticism text.[26] Students are assigned speeches to read and evaluate including those of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Geraldine Ferraro. The course appears to be one that could well have been taught 30 years ago. Andrews' daring departure from traditional speech criticism is the inclusion of a speech that is only five years old--and by a woman.

Sonja Foss' University of Oregon course in "Rhetorical Criticism"[27] makes use of her new text.[28] The two are keyed to each other, and the students explore the variety of methods explained and illustrated in that text. A student paper that Foss includes as an example shows clearly that she and her students have made the thirty year journey to now. That paper makes use of a Burkeian pentadic critical perspective to examine the Women's Peace Encampment on Greenham Common--a paper using both a non-traditional method and a non-traditional object for criticism.[29]

Bruce Gronbeck calls his undergraduate University of Iowa course "Persuasion in Society."[30] The texts are persuasion texts rather than criticism texts which is a reflection of Gronbeck's focus on effect. In terms of the objects for criticism this course, unlike Andrews', would not have been offered 30 years ago. Critical attention is directed to ongoing rhetorical activity--advertising, public relations, and political campaigns. Attention is also given to film and television as forms of discourse although it is does not appear that extensive attention is given to the special qualities of these media of communication.

Malcolm Sillars' course at the University of Utah is entitled "Communication Criticism" which immediately alerts the reader to Sillars intention to examine a variety of critical objects.[31] The theoretical grounding for Sillars course is the reading of Rosenfield's "Anatomy of Critical Discourse"[32] and Brockriede's "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument."[33] With this theory as a guide students are asked to consider a broad range of discourse from essays to speeches, political debates, film, television situation comedies, sports writing and even football. For the students in Sillars course method is flexible and all discourse may be appropriate objects for criticism.

In sum, the seminar materials collected by Sharp really do reflect a diversity of critical method and object that is not seen in the Communication Education symposium. While some are teaching courses in keeping with the pre-1960 tradition of rhetorical criticism, others offer courses with much broader perspectives although, with few exceptions, there still appears to be a strong emphasis on effect.

III

This review and evaluation of the enterprise of rhetorical criticism began with a description of where I and everyone else started off 30 years ago. The WSCA seminar shows where others are today, and it seems only fair that I should also state my position. In broad terms the task of the teacher of rhetorical criticism is to help students think critically and analytically about discourse, to ask what is going on in communication and how it is taking place. In addition it is necessary to develop skills to communicate the

insights that this thinking produces. Thus rhetorical criticism becomes a course in applied written composition. Most but not all of the syllabi included in the WSCA seminar present writing as a significant feature. Study of critical theory should produce familiarity with a range of methods so that there can be a fit between discourse and appropriate methods. Discourse should not be forced into a mold. Rather the correct tools need to be chosen to illuminate the discourse under analysis. Such study should help produce sophisticated consumers and producers of discourse.

NOTES

[1] Martin J. Medhurst, et al. "Focus on Teaching Rhetorical Criticism," Communication Education, 38 (July 1989), 175-213.

[2] Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird, Speech Criticism (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1948).

[3] Thonssen and Baird, p. 144.

[4] James L. Golden, Goodwin F. Berquist, and William Coleman, The Rhetoric of Western Thought (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1976).

[5] Lester Thonssen, ed., Selected Readings in Rhetoric and Public Speaking (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1942).

[6] William Norwood Brigance, ed., A History and Criticism of American Public Address, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1943).

[7] Booker T. Washington, William Jennings Bryan, and Robert M. LaFollette.

[8] Orville A. Hitchcock, "Jonathan Edwards," HCAPA, pp. 213-237.

[9] Roy C. McCall, "Theodore Parker," HCAPA, pp. 238-264.

[10] Forest L. Whan, "Stephen A. Douglas," HCAPA, pp. 777-827.

[11] Peter E. Kane, "The Validity of Current Criticism," Today's Speech, 16 (September 1968), 48-50.

[12] Marie Hochmuth Nichols, Rhetoric and Criticism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963).

[13] Marie Hockmuth, "Kenneth Burke and the 'New Rhetoric'," and "I. A. Richards and the 'New Rhetoric'," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 38 (April 1952), 133-44; 44 (February 1958), 1-16.

[14] Edwin Black, Rhetorical Criticism (New York: The Macmillan Company,

10

1965).

15 Anthony Hillbruner, Critical Dimensions (New York: Random House, 1966).

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17 Thomas R. Nilsen, ed., Essays on Rhetorical Criticism (New York: Random House, 1968).

18 Thomas R. Nilsen, "Interpretative Function of the Critic;" Joseph L. Blau, "Public Address as Intellectual Revelation;" Robert D. Clark, Lessons from the Literary Critics;" Marie Hochmuth, "Burkeian Criticism;" W. Charles Redding, "Extrinsic and Intrinsic Criticism;" Donald C. Bryant, "Of Style;" Barnet Baskerville, "Selected Writings on the Criticism of Public Address;" Western Speech. 21 (Spring 1957), 70-118.

19 Mark S. Klyn, "Toward a Pluralistic Rhetorical Criticism;" Otis M. Walter, "On the Varieties of Rhetorical Criticism;" Essays on Rhetorical Criticism, Thomas R. Nilsen, ed., pp. 146-172.

20 Robert L. Scott and Bernard L. Brock, eds., Methods of Rhetorical Criticism (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972).

21 Leland M Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Historical Movements," "The Rhetorical Structure of the 'New Left' Movement: Part I," Methods of Rhetorical Criticism, pp. 346-383.

22 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds., Form and Genre Shaping Rhetorical Action (Falls Church, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, n.d.).

23 Martin Medhurst and Thomas Benson, eds., Rhetorical Dimensions in Media (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1984).

24 Harry Sharp, Jr., compiler, Seminar: Teaching Rhetorical Criticism to

11 Undergraduates (Spokane, Washington: Western Speech Communication Association, 1989).

25 James R. Andrews, "S305 Speech Criticism," Sharp, pp.60-63.

26 _____, The Practice of Rhetorical Criticism (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1983).

27 Sonja K. Foss, "Rhetorical Criticism," Sharp, pp. 116-119.

28 _____, Rhetorical Criticism (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1989).

29 Diana Brown Sheridan, "The Power of the Personal in Protest Action," Sharp, pp. 120-124.

30 Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Persuasion in Society," Sharp, pp. 125-130.

31 Malcolm O. Sillars, "Communication Criticism," Sharp, pp. 177-193.

32 Lawrence B. Rosenfield, "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse," Speech Monographs, 25 (1968), 50-69.

33 Wayne Brockriede, "Rhetorical Criticism as Argument," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 60 (1974), 165-174.

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